



For the Food

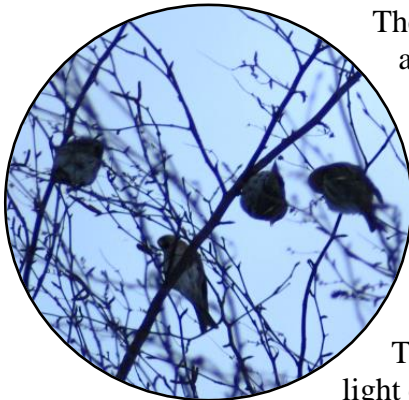
Mornings have become pretty interesting at my place lately. Cold winter mornings invariably involve fire-making in the basement wood burner, as well as the kitchen cook stove, so I try to lie in bed until my spouse is forced to perform these tasks. To his credit, he mostly does this without complaint. When I judge that the frost has come off the cold tile floor, I make my way downstairs from the bedroom and settle into my easy chair, where I snuggle with the new Christmas blanket my oldest daughter gave me, pet my old dog, and watch an episode of my favorite humorous sit-com, most likely with a hot pack on whatever aches the most on any given day. If I'm lucky, the logger comes padding through a time or two, and drops me off a cup of coffee. Broughten coffee is my favorite kind of coffee. As the man and the dogs depart the house at o-dark-thirty to head to the woods, I head for a soak in the tub to loosen up those creaky joints, and then some restorative stretching on the floor.

About that time is when a little light begins to show in the sky, and Cal puts in an appearance. Cal is the old farm cat, the one who came home one time when we were picking up a horse. The girls who rode that horse and even the horse itself are now gone from the place, but the cat is still hanging in there. She's getting older, and since I can sympathize with her stage in life, I've made it a practice to augment the dried cat food in the barn with some softer, canned stuff. Especially in the winter, I figure she needs the energy. Cal comes to the big glass door near where I am stretching, and scratches on the glass to announce she is ready for her breakfast. The trick is to provide her with this soft food before it can freeze into a hard chunk.

Making sure Cal gets that can of cat food is a more complicated task that you might imagine. As it turns out, canned cat food is one of the yummiest creations on earth. Having noticed that Cal has really slowed down on the mouse patrol, this winter I added two young cats to my barn. Known as the Rons, these two orange boys are the result of a cat "rescue" performed by my youngest daughter. They come from a group of at least 6 orange cats, all named Ron, because it was pretty hard to tell them apart. The Rons are not in need of canned cat food, being perfectly able to subsist on the dry food and any mice they catch for me, but they really love the stuff, and totally gorge themselves on it until their little bellies poke out and they sit around belching. The Rons are young and quick, and it is impossible to feed Cal this delicious cat food without the Rons showing up. It's costing me a fortune, but I find it goes best if I give every cat a can, and then stand over them to insure each stays on his own meal.

On mornings on which I'm in a hurry, I just head on out to work and hope for the best, but preferably not before I take a little time to enjoy the birds. As the light is just growing in the sky is when the winter finches arrive. A busy, chittering flock of common redpolls has been coming

in lately, and it is one of my great morning joys to watch as the birds alight in the trees and pour onto the feeders.



The common redpoll is a small, streaked bird with a red cap; males also have a pinkish breast. A bird of the Arctic, our redpolls come from the north. More than any other reason, they come for the food. Not with us every year, their presence on the Chippewa National Forest is triggered by widespread failure of seed crops farther north, especially of the birch and spruce trees. They often appear in 2-year cycles. This finch is not particularly loyal to specific breeding and wintering areas.

This little bird is well adapted to the cold. They are active in lower light conditions than are many more southern birds. Their throats have expanding pouches, allowing them to gather seeds quickly, and crack and digest them in more sheltered locations. Their feathers are well structured to withstand cold. Redpolls can roost in snow tunnels overnight, some of which may be a foot long and a few inches deep. The little seeds they eat are very high in energy.

When not at your feeder, you may see redpolls hanging from the tops of birch or spruce trees, eating the tiny seeds out of the birch catkins or spruce cones. Acrobatic, these little birds really put on a show as they flit around and hang upside down. Sometimes they will shake the seeds out of birch catkins, and then fly down and pick the seeds out of the snow, where it is more sheltered from the wind. Their constant chet-chet-chet will draw your eyes to the trees and help you to be aware of their presence.

Although I'm sure they appreciate thistle seed at a feeder, redpolls will make good use of sunflower seed. On a housekeeping note, it's a good idea to regularly clean your feeders. Salmonella infections can arise from dirty feeding conditions, and can result in significant mortality in birds like redpolls, goldfinches, and pine siskins. It's recommended that twice a year you wash your feeders with a solution of 1 part bleach:9 parts water, rinse them well, and allow them to dry. Accumulations of uneaten seed should also be removed from the ground below feeders.

At my house, there hasn't been much of a chance for seed to accumulate below the feeders this winter, because my chickens have been out and about. These particular chickens are smarter than most, and have become quite aware of unusual food sources. One morning I sat down intending to pet the Rons after they finished their breakfast, and was interested to see one of my hens come out of the coop, fly up over the chicken yard fence, and make a beeline to where the cats and I were sitting on the kitchen stoop. She began pecking around near the cat food, and then pecked at the Rons until they departed, at which point she gobbled the remaining food as fast as she could. About that time she was joined by the rooster and a couple other hens.

This situation has further developed such that this particular hen now shows up every morning at the glass door beside Cal, I guess to let me know it's time to eat. I've taken to standing guard over the cats with a broom, ready to fend off the chicken long enough so the cats can eat a little

food. As I drive out my driveway headed towards work, I have seen Miss Peck Hen following the Rons around. In her little chicken brain, she probably associates them with the food, and figures there must be more if she just keeps on their tail.

Isn't it funny, what all goes on over food?

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Chippewa National Forest

